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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000062

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: A TALE OF TWO BY-ELECTIONS: WIN SOME,
LOSE SOME

REF: A. 09 BANGKOK 1541 (THAKSIN SUPPORTER WINS)

[1](#)B. 09 BANGKOK 0079 (GOVERNING COALITION)

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Classified By: POL Counselor George P. Kent, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The Thai political New Year began with two hotly contested by-elections that many observers suggested could help determine the political fortunes for the opposition Puea Thai and coalition Phumjai Thai (PJT) parties in the lead-up to the next round of elections. In the end, the two parties fought to a draw: Puea Thai eked out a win in northeastern Mahasarakham on January 3, while PJT won decisively in eastern Prachin Buri on January 10.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: These local contests transcend the overly simple red-yellow shorthand divide that often dominates discussions about Thai politics and obscures more enduring dynamics, as well as the pluralism of the Thai political landscape. PJT in particular demonstrated in Prachin Buri that the classic approach to Thai politics -- utilizing a known local candidate affiliated with a powerful provincial family -- remains a winning formula in Thailand regardless of the party affiliation of the previous occupant. The PJT win in Prachin Buri was also significant because it demonstrated the party's ability to win a seat outside of party godfather Newin Chidchob's traditional stronghold in the lower Northeast. End Summary and Comment.

HAPPY NEW YEAR...NOW GO VOTE

[1](#)3. (C) Thai politics got off to a running start in 2010 with two by-elections held over the first two weekends. The elections constituted what amounted to a third round of by-elections, with the first iteration having taken place in January 2009 when 29 seats were contested after the Constitutional Court ordered the dissolution of Puea Thai's predecessor, the People's Power Party (REF B). At the time, Phumjai Thai took advantage of the vacuum and Puea Thai growing pains to clean up in the elections. By the time the second round of elections rolled around in June of 2009, the Puea Thai party had found its political footing; the party's candidates won both of the contested seats, results that many pundits said confirmed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's enduring popularity in the rural Northeast (REF

A).

PUEA THAI WINS IN MAHASARAKHAM - BARELY

14. (SBU) The opposition Puea Thai party narrowly held onto one of its seats in a January 3 by-election in the Northeastern province of Mahasarakham. Puea Thai battled back a spirited effort by coalition partner Phumjai Thai, prevailing by the slimmest of margins when Prayut Siriphanit was proclaimed the winner with 111,394 votes to PJT's Khomkhai Udonphim's 110,158 votes. Voter turnout was a robust 65 percent. Though the Northeast is generally considered a stronghold for Puea Thai, the election took place just across the border from PJT strongman Newin Chidchob's home province of Buriram.

15. (C) Despite the loss, PJT publicly tried to frame the results as "a victory" for the party; like the June by-election in Sakon Nakhon, however, the reality was that the party had invested considerable resources in the election and considered it a winnable seat. The high numbers for PJT did not necessarily imply widespread support for the party. A common feature of Thai by-elections is that coalition partners traditionally opt out in favor of the strongest coalition party contesting a runoff poll. PJT may not, therefore, count on similar support in the next general election.

16. (C) Phumjai Thai spokesman Supachai Jaisamut told us January 11 that the party was bitterly disappointed with the results in Mahasarakham. Phumjai Thai had outspent Puea Thai by at least two to one in the province and yet still fell short of victory. According to Supachai, the victory stood

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as a vivid reminder of former PM Thaksin's continued popularity in the northeast.

OLD SCHOOL POLITICS EFFECTIVE IN PRACHIN BURI

17. (C) In stark contrast to the results in Mahasarakham, PJT easily defeated Puea Thai in the east-central province of Prachin Buri in the by-election held on January 10. The election was held to fill a vacancy in the province created after a resignation of an MP originally elected in December 2007 on the Matchima ticket. According to unofficial results, PJT's Amnart Wilawan received 138,575 votes to the 68,375 votes for the Puea Thai candidate, Gen. Sit Sitthimongkol. Provincial election officials said voter turnout was about 60 percent, with a high number of no-vote ballots.

18. (C) PJT's decision to run Amnart in the election hearkened back to traditional local-style Thai politics wherein a party fields a candidate with strong local ties and support. The previous MP, Kiatkorn Pakpiansil won his seat with the Matchima Thippathai Party, before later joining the Democrat Party after his party was dissolved in December 2008. The courts ruled that his seat was vacant after he announced he was leaving the Democrat Party last September. Winner Amnart's uncle, Suthorn Wilawan -- a former deputy health minister and eight-time MP -- won a seat in the 2007 general election, also running under the banner of Matchima Thippathai, but lost his seat after the Election Commission ruled he had engaged in vote-buying. Matchima Thippathai merged with Newin Chitchob's faction to form the PJT following the December 2008 ruling.

19. (C) Supachai told us that although he was pleased with Phumjai Thai's victory in the election, the outcome was never really in doubt as soon as the party had enlisted Amnart to run. In Supachai's mind, the only surprising aspect of the election was that the Puea Thai party managed to net nearly 70,000 votes despite spending no money, not campaigning, and

fielding what he considered an uncompetitive candidate.
JOHN